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## REMINISCENCES OF WAR.

BY CARMEN SYLVA, THE QUEEN OF ROUMANIA.

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THE sun had set over Bucharest, casting a blood-red glow upon the broad city and the distant horizon, until the window-panes gleamed like fiery eyes. Then a softer hue overspread everything: the plateau deepened to violet, the heavens grew rosy-red, and the mist, packed with unhealthy malarial vapor, stole from the lower levels, and night at last rolled slowly over the whole country. The continuous, raucous groaning of the shells, which filled the spaces between Giurgewo and Rustchuk with tremors, died away. I stood on the little veranda, usually so sunny, where already many convalescents had basked in the autumn warmth, and awaited the fresh convoy of wounded, which had been announced, but had not yet arrived. At last the long-drawn, melancholy shriek of the engine broke the silence of the night, and the long train steamed slowly into the little station of Cotroceni, which I had turned into a refuge for the wounded on their way to the various other hospitals.

As far as was possible to one in haste, I selected for my care those whose wounds seemed to be the most severe, or whose condition needed most attention; but many dragged themselves along to implore that they might be taken too. I believe that they had a kind of superstition that my patients were more likely to be cured. In silence the solemn procession emerged from the darkness. The wounded men raised themselves in their beds to scan the new arrivals by the feeble and flickering light of the lamp which was always burning before the Ikon on the wall. A few, heavily groaning, lay still, and showed no interest: they did not even throw a glance towards the door. The surgeons moved from bed to bed changing the bandages; one of my ladies held a light, and I did what I could to encourage the nervous. They lay like tired

children, and groaned: "Oh! those carts, those carts!" For five days they had endured the jolting of the carts, and most of the wounds were in so terrible a state that we no longer used the word "gangrene," which the poor patients had learned to understand, but merely said in an undertone in French: "*Il y a du noir.*"

They told us what they had suffered from frost-bite, from the jolting on the road, from hunger and pain. There was one man only who uttered no sound. He made no complaint, told us nothing; in short, said not a single word. With eyes on the ground, he sat up on the edge of his bed and gnashed his teeth, which were invisible behind a dark beard. When his bandage was removed, we found a rather serious wound; one finger, half shot off, had gangrened, and was full of maggots and dirt. The surgeons shook their heads: "A strange wound," they said, half aloud. A jet of blood gushed out and splattered upon my dress. Half fainting he laid his head on my shoulder, and with clenched teeth kept praying us impatiently that his finger might be cut off. The surgeons had some difficulty in grasping the vein with their forceps and stopping the hemorrhage; his finger seemed to have been shot away from the inside of his hand. Trembling with cold, he repeated his entreaties. We endeavored to question him so far as his weakness and loss of blood might allow him to reply; but he gave no answer, turned his head away, kept his eyes on the floor, and gnashed his teeth. It was late at night before the last bandage was in place. Full of anxiety, I crossed over to the little summer-house, which, roughly improvised in an old ruined monastery, was bitterly cold in winter. The plateau of Cotroceni was dotted with myriads of Russian carters, who had come in ceaseless cavalcades from the furthest steppes of Russia, and who were never again to see their homes. There, graves were waiting them beneath the snow; with their horses and wagons they were to vanish from the face of the earth. Pariah-dogs and birds of prey were already gorging themselves upon the carcasses of horses, which lay where they had fallen, for no one could be spared to remove them. The barracks, now converted into hospitals, cast a bright line of light along the darkness, as I lay down for a few hours' rest. As a rule, I was up again before four o'clock, and then thought over and noted down the programme for the day.

Next morning I found the man with the wounded finger still sunk in the same gloomy silence, and with a still more sinister expression upon his face. Silent and shivering with cold, he sat on his bed, staring fixedly in front of him. I was accustomed to see the beautiful eyes of my Roumanians ("*les yeux dramatiques roumains*," as a French surgeon called them) turned upon me with childlike confidence and joy, and I stood helpless before this expression of disconsolate torpidity. I could not stay long just then, and indeed did not return all that day, for we had improvised five hospitals in the town, and they all lacked every equipment save what was afforded by a little company of self-sacrificing, willing women, who procured the most necessary articles at the cost of their dearest possessions. It was no easy task, especially as there was then no "Red Cross" at all, and our hastily organized ambulance had nothing but what could be collected on the spur of the moment. It is only in time of war that the incredible insufficiency of common preparations becomes evident: what seemed at first a vast supply of beds and bandages is swallowed up in a couple of hours, and we stand helplessly facing dire necessity, with the danger of losing lives that might easily be saved but for the want of cleanliness and a little more linen. Were I to write a volume on this theme, I could not do justice to all that the women of Roumania did in those days of trial. Day and night they were to be found at their posts, giving all they had, whether they could spare it or no; yet they were not trained by any "Samaritan" hospital or by the Red Cross League. Many of these ladies, however, were accustomed to take the doctor's place on their own estates, where there was no medical assistance within miles. Besides, times such as these teach one in a few hours much that one did not know before. It is, as it were, a merciful dispensation of God that more mistakes are not made, and that one kind helper learns from another how things ought *not* to be done. People thought that I was most experienced; they had forgotten that I was already settled in Roumania at the time of the Franco-German War and that during the Bohemian Campaign I was living on the Rhine. In other words, I had been as far as possible from the theatres of war; so far, in fact, as to have been myself one of those simple people who, sending little, had flattered themselves they had sent enormous supplies. I took care not to tell the truth, however, for I had made minute inquiries and thought

to myself that, even if I should make mistakes, others make them also; we none of us knew anything. When one has not even got sufficient shirts for one single ward, no more bedding, no cots and no dressings, one may have ever so much knowledge and experience, and yet they will be of no avail! In peace, numbers convey no idea to our minds. In war alone one learns what one thousand, two thousand, four thousand wounded mean. The joy with which each fresh parcel is greeted should, indeed, reward the generous givers; and yet at the moment one has hardly time to thank them! Nowadays, there is far too much talk about the emancipation of women. The sex in this respect curiously fail to grasp the beautiful part which has been allotted them—the privilege of help! So much is needed that one may be able to help. So much intelligence, heart, foresight, experience, good-humor and self-sacrifice, that to learn to help takes a life-time. War, which we otherwise reckon as one of the greatest evils of humanity, has at least this use—it teaches self-forgetfulness, it brings one into touch with the heart and strength of a nation, it levels all differences of rank and class, and makes for the universal brotherhood of man. If only one kept the same ideal before one in time of peace, there would be no time then to think of emancipation for sheer pressure of work!

When I got home late that evening, one of the ladies, who was engaged in my hospital, told me that the curiously silent patient had asked urgently for me, and that, however much they had begged him to tell them what was troubling him, he had steadfastly refused to speak to any one except myself. They had hoped to get him to confess and ease his mind by summoning a priest, who placed his “cope” upon his head and said some prayers over him. It was in vain, and the poor fellow continually exclaimed: “The Princess! I will see the Princess! I will tell the Princess everything!” At last they told him that they could not find me just then, and that he must be patient until the morning.

On entering the ward the following morning, I could see from a distance how the bed was trembling beneath him. He tried to jump out of bed as soon as he saw me, but fell on his knees as the attendants prevented him. Putting his hands together, as though in prayer, he began to make a formal confession to me, at the same time gnashing his teeth so loudly and trembling so violently that the bed shook with his emotion. He was as yellow as wax; pyæmia

had already set in; and he glared about him with such a horror in his eyes that the sight of him filled me with fear and pity. "I! I! I did it!" he groaned, with trembling lips; "I thought of my mother; yes, I thought of my mother, and then the devil whispered to me: 'One shot, and you are wounded, and then they will send you home!' I did it and now I must die, now I am a suicide and lost to all eternity, in hell for all eternity! The devil whispered to me! Only the earth and my rifle know what I did, and now I am a coward and a suicide. Hell is grasping at me already! I feel it, I am consuming in its flames! Oh! forgive me, forgive me! Give me peace before hell gets hold of me!" I tried to speak gently to him of God's goodness and long-suffering, but he interrupted me: "You, your path will be strewn with flowers: for me there is only a merciless hell!" How long he was speaking I do not know. All the wounded were sitting up in their beds, listening, pale with terror; the surgeons, deeply moved, stood round this awful death-bed, where a luckless handsome youth, who perhaps had never done an evil deed till that particular moment, believed himself to be handed over to all the terrors of hell. The fire of the ague, which devoured his bones, he felt as the flames of hell, and his terror was such that one seemed to see the Pit opening its jaws before him.

In so terrible a scene, indifference was impossible. The chattering of his teeth and the broken words of that memorable confession could be heard throughout the ward. At last he grew so weak that they coaxed him to lie down, and he sank again into the same disconsolate silence. Only when he was asked how he felt, he replied: "Far better than I deserve: I am a miserable sinner!" On the third day we moved him to a tent, as we feared that the blood-poisoning might be infectious to the other patients, and his despair too harrowing to the emotions of the wounded. His patience remained unshaken to the last; but I did not feel that I had been successful in allaying his fears and bringing him consolation. Still, there was no further burst of emotion, however great his sufferings may have been, and he passed into eternity calmly and without a word.

The day after, a dense, heavy autumn mist enshrouded us, as with a curtain of icy lead. From the hospital windows one could hardly distinguish the nearest tents, when a poor woman, wading barefoot through the deep mud, emerged from the gray monotone

of the mist. She was accompanied by a man, apparently a neighbor from her village. I saw her talking to the soldiers of the Ambulance, but before I could reach her she had given the name of her son and was asking after him. Thoughtlessly the soldier replied: "He died last night in this very bed!" The poor woman fell upon her knees, as though she had been struck by lightning; the clean linen she had brought with her fell into the mud. Beating her breast, tearing at her veil and hair, she kept calling his name, "Radule! Radule! Radule! Radule!" out into the mist. She would not let herself be comforted, she declined both food and drink, and we barely succeeded in forcing on her companion some money for her use. She would not stay with us, but began her homeward journey without delay. I watched her figure in the mist loom larger and larger, and listened to her voice growing hoarser in the distance. So long as I live I shall hear the cry of that disconsolate mother's heart sounding in my ears: "Radule! Radule! Radule!"

In the ward, however, they had regained their spirits, for a lad lay there who was happy in a slight knowledge of the violin. We had got him a fiddle; and he lay on his bed with a happy smile, forgetful of the pains in his leg, and coaxed some little tune from his instrument, his pale lips shaping into the word "Sublime!" Every one was glad in his gladness, and no one thought of criticising his playing. Amongst the first batch of wounded was the only son of a well-to-do miller, a lad of about eighteen, who had been shot through the hand, and tetanus had set in. We made every endeavor to conquer the terrible and deadly cramp by rubbing and massaging his back. But all, of course, was in vain, and soon his pleasant childlike smile was changed to the tortured and distorted semblance of a grin. As he knew that he must die, I spoke some comforting words to him and said: "God is near to you, He will help you." "Yes, yes, do you not see?" he exclaimed; "I see Him." All night through he made the sign of the cross; and, as his strength failed him, he begged the lady on duty from between his clenched teeth: "Make—me—the cross!"

It was a pleasant hour in the wards when all the bandages had been changed and letters were dictated to those at home. We had allotted the duty of writing to the young girls, who were allowed to distribute the food, make cigarettes and write letters. One of the wounded had had its lower jaw so shot away that he could

hardly speak, and yet he dictated the following letter to his wife: "I hope this letter will find you as happy as can be. As regards myself, you must know that I am very well" (he was dying!) "and in the Princess's Hospital. I was shot through the breast." "But, Nicolai," interrupted the girl with a roguish glance, "you are telling lies; that isn't true at all!" "Do you think," said he, quite seriously, "that I would tell her what I look like, so that she may be unfaithful to me?" Another threatened his wife with the most terrible beating, should she commit herself in his absence.

One young man would by no means allow his leg to be amputated. "Have it done," said his comrade on the next bed, who had had his hand cut off the day before; "let them do it; it does not hurt!"

The convalescents performed complete comedies, which they made up for the amusement of those who were still in bed. These plays were often extremely funny and witty, representing scenes at the law courts or elections, and in performing them they used to develop a truly marvellous eloquence.

When the first body of Turks was expected, I went to the hospital and delivered a long speech, in which I explained to our wounded that prisoners of war and wounded are no longer enemies, but brothers. "Yes, yes," said one of them, "brothers; but if only I see the man who wounded me—" and a threatening fist completed the sentence. At eleven o'clock at night I drove alone in my sleigh through the wonderful moonlit night, and found the Turks being zealously cared for by our wounded, who were holding lights and basins for the surgeons as kindly as though they had never thought of looking for the men who had wounded them! They could not talk to one another, but as it is generally accepted that no words are wanted for making love or playing cards, they gambled all day long. The patience and gratitude of the Turks were indeed admirable. At first they were terribly frightened, because they had made short work of our prisoners, and so thought that the same fate would befall themselves. But when they saw that they were carefully looked after, their gratitude knew no bounds. I was present when a surgeon, after resetting a patient's elbow, put several tubes through the shattered joint. The Turk lay there with closed eyes and did not utter a sound; though his skin clung to his bones in agony, not an eyelash quivered, but when the surgeon had finished, he stroked his arm as if to thank



him with a gesture. When we asked them how they were getting on, the invariable answer, even to their last breath, was: "Better, well." The poor men suffered greatly from homesickness, especially at first. An Arab captive threw himself on the ground before me, and, kissing my feet, implored me to allow him to go home, at the same time showing me on his fingers that he had eight little children. I had to leave him unconsolated, for I could not even talk to him. He died of homesickness.

It was very interesting to observe the different ways in which the various races met their sufferings. The Turks were the most stoical, the Russians the most patient, the Roumanians showed a peculiar blending of humor and deep melancholy. They clamored almost incessantly for their mothers, whose hands they covered with kisses; whilst the prettiest of young wives would only be greeted with a short imperious nod after a separation of some months. The gypsies were the most sensitive and wept freely: these highly strung children of Indian dreamland, so full of mystery for us, are like creatures in a fairy-tale. Many a dying man greeted me as "mother" in those days.

Many an awful story, too, I had to listen to,—stories that cannot be compressed into so small a space, but here is one of them:

The autumn leaves are falling singly through the peaceful air of the garden of Goleschti. The sun lights them up again for the last time, and then, when they seem to be fullest of life, their hour of death has come. In the garden of Goleschti patriots have been brought to sacrifice their possessions, liberty, happiness and peace for their country. There lives the patriarchal family of Golesco, great-grandmother, grandmother, with splendid sons and daughters, and a great host of grandchildren. Peace reigns supreme just now in the garden of Goleschti. Under the linden-tree sits an old lady, dressed in black. A book lies on her lap, and her great light-brown eyes are piercing into the past, recalling all the forms of those to whom she has sacrificed her life, and whose death-beds she has soothed. She has never married; her countenance is sunken and ascetic, but of a great nobility and shining gentleness, such as one sees in Murillo's picture of St. Thomas. Her life is full of cares: she has educated the orphans of her brothers and sisters, taught the whole village the beautiful art of embroidery, encouraged to retain the tradition of the Roumanian national costume, which pleased me much when first I came among

them, and became a source of profit for the country. She is the guardian angel of the whole neighborhood. Just now she is giving herself a moment's rest; she is looking into the secrets of her tired heart, whilst her thoughts flutter down to the grave, as the dead leaves to the earth, both irradiated by the life-giving beams of the sun.

Now a sound catches her ear and she turns her head. A shade of deep compassion flits across her brow; for, through the quiet air, the sorrowing tones of the death chant, sung by a single voice, come tremblingly from the village street. It is the priest, moving slowly in his vestments between the mean huts, followed by his acolyte with the censer and a funeral procession, followed also by mourners, who often improvise most poetical *Bocete* like the *voceratrice* in Corsica. In a pine coffin on the bier lies an aged woman with snow-white hair, peaceful and calm, her brow furrowed with the burden of many bitter years. A moderate procession follows reverently and devoutly. Only one of the followers strays hither and thither, raises her finger to her temple in a military salute, smiles amiably at every one, showing her gleaming rows of teeth, whilst her wonderful brown eyes rest with indifference upon the body that she is honoring. It is Anita, the daughter of the dead woman, the mad girl who in losing her mother loses everything in her world, and yet is ignorant of it all. An old rag, scantily girt round her hips, serves her for drapery; her blouse is open and only now and again does a compassionate hand set straight her fluttering rags. Her black hair falls in disorder from under a kerchief which might once have been bright red. No one appears to be disturbed by her; she glides among them, now forward now backward, always with the military salute and the pleasant vacant smile. She is the only one who laughs at such a time. At last the church door is reached; but, whilst the procession vanishes through it, Anita remains outside for a while, playing round the mossy headstones, until she too disappears under the porch, enticed by the singing. The recluse in the garden looks after her with a sigh, and the story of the mad girl passes through her mind as, placing her slender finger between the leaves of her book, she paces silently up and down over the fallen leaves.

How pretty Anita was, how fresh and full of mirth! Her brown skin was warm as sun ripened fruit, her beautiful eyes gleamed

with exuberance of vitality and roguishness, and how ready was her reply when the boys teased her. One of them had tormented her more than the others; and, when he came in the evening and knocked at her window, she came out and sat with him on the bench every night.

Then came the war; and one sweltering day in August found him, her Mihai, gone. It was no use to cry. "And if I do not return?" he asked, and looked at her. "Then I, too, will die, Mihai!"

The cruel battle of Gravitza had passed, and he had sent news that he was alive and well. But no further tidings came. Anita watched the leaves fall and the heavy mists rise; then came the frost and snow, yet never a word reached her. At last, she could endure the anxiety no longer.

It was strictly forbidden for women to cross the Danube, but she found a means of evading the order. Hiring a wagon, she declared that she had transport service to perform and wandered to Plevna by the side of her little oxen. Carrying a bundle of clean linen for him, and a large melon on her head, and other fruits and bread in the bosom of her blouse, she passed through the camp, through the long trenches beneath the hail of the enemy's bullets, seeking her lover. Then, just at the moment when a man fell shot at her side, she heard that her Mihai had been wounded and carried to some unknown hospital. Pale and speechless, she stood in the icy water of the trenches. She did not even think of bending her head to escape from the bullets. "He got his feet frost-bitten here and a bullet in his shoulder," said one of his comrades; "but I do not know where they have taken him."

Turning away with a heart heavy as lead, she began to search the field hospitals, trembling at the miserable forms of the wounded who could not be moved. Her Mihai could not look like *that*! She was almost glad that she could not find him there. They told her that he would be in Metschka still; so to Metschka she went, barefooted, over the frozen ground, through the dense mist. He had been at Metschka, but had been moved further on to Turno Magurelli. But he was still alive; the bullet had been removed and half his foot taken off, but otherwise he was so far well. Anita wandered on to Turno Magurelli. The whole town had been transformed into a hospital. Going from one to another, she visited twenty hospitals in turn. At last she found out the one

where he had been ; but he had again been moved four days before to Craiova. With a sigh she resumed her bundle and took the road afresh. But he was not to be found in Craiova ; he had gone with yesterday's batch of wounded to Bucharest, for there was no more room at Craiova.

In Bucharest, she asked her way from door to door. Every large house, every barrack and many a school was a hospital. At last, at last, she came to Cotroceni and the barracks of the Rifle Battalion, and at length received the answer, "Yes, he is here," in reply to her inquiries. She begged to be allowed to see him, to nurse him, if she might, and hesitatingly entered between the long rows of beds, guided by a friendly nun who bore the badge of the Red Cross on her arm. A lady with the Red Cross came up to her and said : "Here he is, dear child : you will find him changed !"

Indeed, she could hardly recognize him. Her knees shook on seeing him so pale,—wasted away like an old man. And, when he smiled at her, his smile seemed like a grimace. Oh, God ! how should she bear her sorrow before so many people ! Like a statue she stood by his bedside day and night, without even a thought of resting after her long wanderings. They had to force her to take a little nourishment. Out in the open, endless convoys from the far interior of Russia passed along in the deep mud of the softened roads ; convoys of wounded from the battle-fields, convoys of captured Turks, starving, barefoot on the ice ; convoys of sick, victims to typhus and frost-bite, and half-starved horses which fell a prey to the dogs and crows. Their red and ragged ribs pointed to the heavens, now dark with snow. Presently snow began to fall, as though the compassionate clouds wished to cover the miseries of friend and foe with the same soft, warm covering. Anita saw nothing of all this. Her eyes were only for the face of her Mihai, who lay there so patiently despite his sufferings, and who, when they asked him how he felt, always replied with the same patient word : "*Bine.*" In a whisper he told her how they had cut away half his foot without giving him enough chloroform, and how terribly he had suffered. Then tears rolled down her cheeks, and that was balm to his heart. They told her he was saved, he would not die. Her heart trembled with such joy that she could not even speak. The first time she saw his wounds, her face turned as white as snow. They gave her a draught of wine, and told her that was nothing, it would soon be all right, and she

was to give him a spoonful of medicine to quiet him, if he seemed to be in great pain. He told her about Gravitza and showed her his decorations, though she could hardly bear to listen, so great was her terror. And yet she liked to hear his pale lips tell the story of his heroic deeds. Three bullets had passed through his cap without touching a hair of his head. "You see, if the dear God wills it, one has one's day!" he said. One night he was very unquiet, and bitterly complained of great pain in his shoulder and foot. "I was just going to be relieved, because my feet were frost-bitten after twenty-four hours in the trenches, and then the bullet came! Oh! can't you send me to sleep?"

Hastily seizing one of the medicine bottles in the uncertain light of the night lamp, she gave him a large spoonful and then stayed quite quiet so that he might get to sleep quickly. But he suddenly began to complain of pains in his stomach, and his face became distorted in the most terrible manner. The pains grew worse and worse, and he began to pant for breath. Greatly terrified, Anita awakened a nun who was dropping off to sleep on a wooden chair in the corner. She could not imagine what was the matter with him, and wanted to get some cloths warmed. But Anita, in her terror, ran and called the assistant surgeon to come at once, for God's sake, as Mihai was very ill. He looked at the patient and turned roughly to Anita: "What have you given him?" Anita pointed to the bottle. "My poor wretched child," he cried, "that is carbolic acid!" Anita stared at him as though she could not understand. "Is that very bad?" she whispered. "Bad? It is poison!" said the surgeon, and without troubling further about her, applied every conceivable remedy, but without success. The sick man was already in the throes of the most terrible death struggle. Anita held him in her arms, called him by his name, and prayed aloud. From time to time he made the sign of the cross, and not a word of reproach passed his lips. "And yet I never had my day, Anita," he said. As the dawn broke, he became very quiet and very heavy; and she sat quite still holding him in her arms without a word. She would not let him be taken from her until she was removed by force, that the body might be covered up and carried out. She followed them up to the door, and then, turning round, looked every one in the face and said, "Mihai." That was the only word she was capable of uttering. All others had vanished from her memory; and even that one

word she used less and less often. Charitable people brought her to Goleschti. When her poor mother saw her only child in this pitiable state, she wept bitterly and loud; but Anita smiled, for in those three terrible hours she had drained the cup of earthly suffering. What she thought and felt no human being has ever learned, her suffering remains shrouded in silence, for God in His mercy had given her forgetfulness!

The recluse in the garden was thinking of this, as the procession came out into the sun again and moved towards the churchyard. Smilingly Anita hovered round the open grave, and looked down with curiosity in her beautiful soulless eyes, as all that was left to her was lowered into the earth. Then she wandered through the bystanders and ran back to the village, past the garden where the autumn leaves were still falling noiselessly and the gossamer was weaving a halo of light about the head of the recluse.

CARMEN SYLVA.